

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



John Neal
1793-1876

Perhaps more than any single figure, the multi-talented John Neal reflected and helped shape the positive and productive spirit of 19th century Portland. As a personality of national stature, Neal used his native city as a secular pulpit for the spread of ideas during a period when the American cultural scene was widely decentralized. Given his activities as a novelist, editor, publisher, attorney, businessman, feminist, athlete, talent scout, and, as the country's first serious art critic, it is little wonder that his attainments as an occasional architect have been relegated to academic footnotes.¹ However, architecture was an important facet of his career. Not only do the four stone buildings he designed reflect a strong personal talent, but his ideas in the field had more than a passing influence on the tastes of his community.

Born in Portland in 1793, twelve hours after his sister Rachel, John Neal lost his father a month later.² Supported by his school teacher mother, the boy left school at the age of twelve and became a clerk. After

the Embargo of 1807, he took to the road as a writing master and portrait artist. Finding himself eventually in Baltimore, and bankrupt, Neal turned to the study of law and literature. In 1817 he published his first novel; in 1820 he passed the Maryland Bar exam and in 1823, armed with a modest reputation, sailed for England. While abroad, he wrote a major series of articles about American society and art for *Blackwood's* magazine, entered the household of Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and became an important influence on British attitudes toward America. He returned to America in 1827, bristling with European visions.

Though initially resented by certain townsmen, who believed themselves libelled in his novels, Neal decided to make Portland his permanent home. In 1828 he married Eleanor Hall, began to raise a family and engaged himself in all forms of community activity. Until his death in 1876, the critic fostered a remarkable alliance between working artists and businessmen-patrons that made Portland the cultural rival of Boston. As a contemporary observed of Neal, "...he has all things made according to his notions, dictating to tailors, furniture-makers, house-builders, bookbinders..."³

Neal's property speculations cover nine index pages in the Cumberland County Registry of Deeds. Among these activities was the purchase of a granite quarry in North Yarmouth. Neal's first venture into architectural design seems to have been sparked by his self-taught study of stone and his desire to promote that local resource. In 1836 he erected an elegant granite duplex at 173-175 State Street (Figure 1). Years later he recalled:

Being about to build for myself, I prepared a plan for a block of eight houses, offering to sell the lots, 26½ by 110 feet, on our widest and most fashionable street, for three hundred dollars apiece, which would now be worth about five thousand at least, to any person who would build with me, according to that plan, so as to secure an outward uniformity, leaving each to build the interior as he liked. While purchasing the materials for cash, making my contracts, and preparing for the work, some of those who had engaged to build with me, failed in business, during the crash of 1836; while others undertook to build for themselves on Park Street, according to my plan, four stories, in-



Figure 1. John Neal Block, Portland, 1975 view (Photo by Richard Cheek).

cluding a comfortable basement above ground; but substituting bricks for granite, or gneiss; and wooden cornices and gutters for copper, and shingles, for galvanized iron or zinc, whereby they saved a few hundred, and succeeded in producing a huge, unsafe, unsightly row of tall houses, which passed then, and still pass for a factory, with strangers, though the long descending front has lately been broken up, in two or three places, by projecting windows, and porticos, which have materially improved the architectural appearance of the row. This obliged me to build two houses for myself, instead of one, that certain irregularities in the plan, being doubled, might produce uniformity.⁴

Today's observer will probably not agree with Neal's jaundiced description of the Park Street Row, but his own duplex in the Greek Revival style remains a monument to his refinement of taste and breadth of vision.⁵ Indeed, Neal's bold use of material, with its relative lack of ornamentation, suggests 20th century design. The facade is composed of long pieces of granite from Neal's North Yarmouth quarry. Simple Greek Revival moldings appear around the recessed doorways and the windows of the first three floors. Ironwork consists of a fence and second story balconies bearing the Greek key motif. The Neals resided in the left side of the building. Daniel Winslow, a partner in the quarry, lived on the right until 1849, when it was purchased by Congressman Lorenzo de Medici Sweat and his wife, novelist Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat.⁶ Winslow's real estate advertisement for the house in the *Portland Advertiser* of June 29, 1847, provides the following excellent description of the property:

One of the best-built and most convenient DWELLING-HOUSES in the United States. It stands near the head of State Street in the City of Portland;

is four stories high, with a stone front, and rear of pressed brick; the mahogany doors and stair railings and balustrades, marble fire places, cherry tree sashes, interblinds and sills, and double windows; iron balconies and fence; two kitchens, two bathing rooms, large closets, dressing rooms and chambers (seventeen rooms in all) thoroughly finished from garrett to cellar. The cellar floor is laid with large flat stone — the walls and cistern with blocks of granite; the floors of three stories with the best clear Georgia pine, seasoned by steam at the highest temperature, with deafners; most of the walls are finished with three coats (one of ground marble) and painted upon the average five or six coats-woodwork four. The well and most of the drains are blasted through a bed of talco slate; there are two common and two force and life pumps, for hard and soft water, hot or cold; furnace, water-closet and necessities of the most approved construction; the roof is covered with zinc and armed in the best manner and in every direction, against lightning; water abundant and pure.

Neal's enthusiasm for stone and speculative building continued as his own home neared completion. Early in 1837 he placed the following notice:

ROUGH STONE COTTAGE

PROPOSALS will be received by the subscriber until February 15, 1837, for building and completely finishing, at the United States Quarry, Kennebunkport, (Me.) a Rough Stone Cottage, 36 by 26 feet, and two stories high, to be completed early in the spring of 1837.

The stone will be furnished upon the spot, with the window caps, sills, steps, windows, window frames and doors.

Walls will be 16½ feet high, one foot thick, and laid rough, but of a uniform color; two chimnies, with fire places, ovens, &c. a cellar at least six feet deep with a good wall; a kitchen, dining room, and small room on the ground floor; two chambers — one with a double row of berths on each side, the other without; garret with two rooms; closets where required, one



Figure 2. Rachel Neal House, Portland, late 19th century pencil drawing (Courtesy of Maine Historical Society).

flight of stairs; all to be finished in a plain substantial manner *without mouldings or ornament*, and all the wood work to be thoroughly painted with two or three coats. All materials, except as above excepted, to be furnished by the contractor.

JOHN NEAL
Exchange Street, Portland
for Maine Quarrying Association

Portland, January 12.⁷

Neal, not entirely pleased by the North Yarmouth Quarry's potential, had searched the state for various grades of material. The United States Quarry proved excellent, and its stone could be moved by water transport. In this context, he recalled:

The problem I had been laboring with, was now to be solved. There was "money" in these quarries, to borrow a phrase, lately come into use; and money enough to satisfy any reasonable man. The quarries being secured, associations were formed, charters obtained, operations begun, and the stone from the United-States Quarry was introduced, not only into Portland — where the large, handsome Exchange, and Post-Office were built of it, and stone-fronts came into general use — but into New-York; the result of which was, first, that we have made ourselves altogether independent of supplies from abroad, and never think of going beyond Biddeford, Kennebunkport, North-Yarmouth, Hallowell, and Augusta, for any thing we need in the shape of granite or gneiss; and, secondly, that I made what was called "a good thing" of it, for myself.⁸

Neal's "Rough Stone Cottage" at the U. S. Quarry in Kennebunkport may have been related to a cottage which Neal built at 627 Congress in Portland, now the site of the Fine Arts Cinema (Figure 2). The exact date of this structure is not known, although it is mentioned in deeds as early as April of 1839.⁹ According to writer Daniel C. Colesworthy, Neal constructed the house as a residence for his mother Rachel and his sister, who lived until 1858.¹⁰ Known as the Old Thorn Cottage, it passed to subsequent owners until its demolition in either 1887 or 1888.



Figure 3. Cape Cottage Hotel, Cape Elizabeth, c. 1875 view (MHPC).

It was replaced by the Dr. J. A. Spaulding House, in the construction of which architect John Calvin Stevens incorporated a cottage wall and some of the granite.¹¹ Today, Neal's Stone Cottage is known only through a pencil drawing by Dr. H. M. Nickerson at the Maine Historical Society. Though the building is gone, Neal deserves credit for creating the city's first Gothic Revival cottage and advancing that soon to be popular style foreshadowed in its pairs of large first story pointed arch windows.

In the same year that Neal advertised for the "Rough Stone Cottage", his attention focused on the Cape Elizabeth shore and its potential as a tourist attraction. In 1835 other interests had erected the Cape Cottage Hotel, and now Neal began to buy shares until he gained control of the enterprise. Fires destroyed the first two hotel buildings in 1847 and 1849.¹² After the last fire, Neal turned his attention to designing a safer, more elegant stone structure. This time he produced a three story building in his favored Gothic style (Figure 3). The facility opened in 1851.

The new Cape Cottage was rectangular with two stories of native stone and a third of wood with two front gables. Painted in red trim, the building fronted the sea. The doorways and windows on the first story were in the form of pointed arches and featured diamond-paned glass in the upper sections. Curved brackets appeared, one on either side of the second story and at the corners. They were repeated along the gables, and windows in the wooden gables were capped with triangles which repeated the gable shape. Above these was a triangular window. The wooden balustrades of the first and second story porches were ornamented with such Gothic details as quatrafoils and diamonds. Behind the main building stood a large, board-and-batten barn, with

similar pointed arched features.¹³ The hotel was apparently Neal's last entry into architectural design. He sold his interest in 1853, and the resort continued as a fashionable retreat until it burned in 1894.¹⁴

The State Street duplex, the two stone cottages, and the Cape Cottage Hotel show Neal to have been a talented, well-informed, gentleman architect. But his contributions went beyond actual design and construction into the realm of ideas. He had helped organize and advertise the use of stone, and his progressive tastes fostered an interest in, and an understanding of, the shape and texture of his city. His voice was especially important after Portland suffered the nation's worst urban fire in July of 1866. With 1,500 buildings in ashes, Neal's wise and hopeful writings, especially his *Account of the Great Conflagration in Portland*, threw down the challenge of "a handsomer, a richer, a safer, and a much more beautiful city, for our habitation..."¹⁵ Finally, in 1874, he wrote *Portland Illustrated*, a splendid volume which gives insight into his knowledge of styles and his opinions of nearly every important building in the city.¹⁶ As both a practical designer and an architectural commentator, John Neal left us an enduring legacy.

William David Barry
January, 1986

SOURCES

As a central figure in the community, and as an influence on American arts and literature, Neal invited comment during his life and added to that body of information his strange autobiography, *Wandering Recollections of a Somewhat Busy Life* (Boston, 1869). Though disjointed, it remains the single most important insightful source. A source that should not be ignored is Windsor Daggett's *A Down-East Yankee from the District of Maine* (Portland, 1920), the first attempt at biographical treatment. *American Writers by John Neal*, edited by Fred Lewis Pattee (Durham, N.C., 1937) and *Observations on American Art by John Neal*, edited by Harold Edward Dickson (State College, Pa., 1943) provide solid anthologies of his national criticism. Two good literary biographies have appeared in recent years, Benjamin Lease's, *That Wild Fellow John Neal and the American Literary Revolution* (Chicago, 1978) and Donald A. Sears' *John Neal* (Boston, 1978). The student might also turn to William Barry and Randolph Dominic's article, "The Man who Discovered Edgar Allen Poe", *Down East Magazine*, February 1985. Finally, the author wishes to acknowledge the staff of the Maine Historical Society, Arthur Gerrier of Greater Portland Landmarks, Inc., Randolph Dominic and the late John Pancoast for their assistance.

Drawing of John Neal Courtesy of Maine Historical Society

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NOTES

- ¹ John W. McCoubrey, *American Art, 1700-1960*, Englewood, N.J.: 1965, p. 125.
- ² Donald A. Sears, *John Neal*, Boston: 1978, p. 11.
- ³ Benjamin Lease, *That Wild Fellow John Neal and the American Literary Revolution*, Chicago: 1972, p. 128. The quote is from James Brooks in the *New York Mirror*.
- ⁴ John Neal, *Wandering Recollections of a Somewhat Busy Life*, Boston: 1869, p. 357-358.
- ⁵ Deborah Thompson, Editor, *Maine Forms of American Architecture*, Camden: 1976, pp. 128-129.
- ⁶ Cumberland County Deeds, Book 153, p. 34, shows Neal, Winslow and another investor selling their interest in the North Yarmouth Quarry. This occurred on April 8, 1837. For subsequent sales of Winslow's side of the duplex see Cumberland County Deeds, Book 216, pp. 208, 398 and 399. These took place in 1849. For Neal's 1835 carpentry and joinery contract with George Worcester and William Hoit for the duplex, see Cumberland County Deeds, Book 143, pp. 395-399.
- ⁷ *Eastern Argus*, January 12, 1837.
- ⁸ Neal, *Wandering Recollections*, p. 359.
- ⁹ Cumberland County Deeds, Book 163, p. 326 and p. 542 shows Neal mortgaged land and property to one James Furbish, this being all the land on the northwesterly side of Maine (Congress) Street "adjoining the house of Rachael (sic) Neal (widow) wherein is built the Stone Cottage, so called, now occupied by Edward Fox." Though the language is confusing, it is clear from other sources that Rachel W. Neal continued to occupy the cottage with her daughter.
- ¹⁰ Daniel Clement Colesworthy, *School is Out*, Boston: 1876, p. 498.
- ¹¹ John Calvin Stevens and Albert Winslow Cobb, *Examples of American Domestic Architecture*, New York: 1889, plate XXIV.
- ¹² William B. Jordan, Jr., *A History of Cape Elizabeth, Maine*, Portland, 1965, pp. 132-141. Also see *Portland Advertiser*, July 23, 1850; *Portland Transcript*, October 24, 1894 and *Portland Transcript*, October 31, 1894.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Jordan, *History of Cape Elizabeth*, p. 141.
- ¹⁵ John Neal, *Account of the Great Conflagration in Portland, July 4th and 5th, 1866*, Portland: 1866, p. 15.
- ¹⁶ John Neal, *Portland Illustrated*, Portland: 1874.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY JOHN NEAL

John Neal Block, 173-175 State Street, Portland, 1836, Extant.
"Rough Stone Cottage", U.S. Quarry, Kennebunkport, 1837,
Unlocated.
Rachel Neal House, Congress Street, Portland, by 1839,
Destroyed.
Cape Cottage Hotel, Cape Elizabeth, 1850, Destroyed.